

The Five-Subject Notebook

At some schools, teachers deal with the reality that the majority of their students live in poverty; at others, where only pockets of poverty exist, teachers may become complacent in their “middle-classness.” At many rural and suburban schools, the minority of low-income students can be rendered invisible to teachers. Unfortunately, teachers may assume that all students have access to resources that may be unavailable to some. This point was illustrated one evening at the beginning of the school term.

Late one evening, I popped into a local discount store to pick up index cards. In the school supply aisle, I noticed two young men. They were about 19 and 11 years of age, pierced, tattooed, and in black leather jackets. I felt some concern as I approached, but quickly reminded myself that I taught students such as these every day, and I had three boys of my own that on occasion could make themselves look scary.

As I approached, I overheard part of their conversation. The older of the pair was trying to explain to the younger (I presumed, his brother) that he simply didn't

have the money to purchase a five-subject notebook.

“But my teacher said I have to have a five-subject notebook,” pleaded the younger boy as he eyed the name-brand, official-looking notebook.

“Look, I don't have the money for that, but we can buy five of these one-subject notebooks for 88 cents each. You can put them together,” the older boy patiently explained.

In an attempt to find something cheaper, the two went up and down the aisle. The younger boy, however, kept coming back to the five-subject notebook. I could only imagine what was going through his head as he picked up the notebook and then put it down again. Would his teacher think that he just didn't care, didn't listen, or worse, was being downright defiant? Would the substitution of cheaper notebooks color the teacher's perception of him? After all, who would imagine that this particular young man cared so much what his teacher wanted? This was a pretty big dilemma created by a simple request.

Finally, I heard the older one ask in desperation to appease the younger, “Didn't the people you live with get money for school supplies?”

“Yes, but we went before school started, and now the teacher says we have to have a five-subject notebook.”

My heart was broken. After overhearing the conversation, I offered to buy the five-subject notebook along with my purchas-



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es, but this was met with suspicion. As we were walking to the checkout counter, I learned that the older of the two had dropped out of high school. It wasn't hard to imagine the same fate for the younger boy.

While no teacher would deliberately cause a child embarrassment, I wondered how many times in schools everywhere, teachers with good intentions inadvertently set up children for similar situations. I took stock, and vowed to check myself every day to ensure that I did not create impossible dilemmas for my students.

Do you have a “telling story” about your teaching or learning that is close to your heart and that gives meaning to your professional career? Send your personal story, no more than 600 words, to Kathie-Jo Arnoff, Managing Editor, at kathiejo@kdp.org or *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 3707 Woodview Trace, Indianapolis, IN 46268.

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